First published in "A Fractured North – Facing Dilemmas," edited by Erich Kasten, Igor Krupnik, Gail Fondahl 2024: 75 – 89. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. — *Electronic edition for* dh-north.org

4 DONBASS-BERINGIA: A PERSONAL JOURNEY ALONG THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE

Nicholas J. Parlato

Donetsk, 2012

In August 2012, I moved into a small one-room apartment above the European School of Foreign Languages in Donetsk, Ukraine. The school sat on a narrow road, two blocks from the city's immaculate and bustling Lenin Square, where children careened around in Power Wheels, young girls posed for photoshoots in front of the granite fountains, and holiday celebrations (not to mention political rallies) drew all manner of residents. Having just finished my BA in Russian Language, History, and Literature, I was eager to immerse myself in the rhythm of the lively and historically important Donbass region.

During the day, I taught English to over twenty different groups of students, ranging from elementary school children to working professionals. My friendships and connections grew quickly with near round-the-clock interactions, at first with my fellow teachers, L. and V., our administrator N., and our school director N. It quickly expanded into a wide network of European volunteer corps participants, local youths, and professionals. I met people through spontaneous conversations at bars, concerts, on the city *marshrutkas* (routed taxicabs), and through friends and acquaintances. By way of example, in one encounter, while walking the club-lined boardwalk of Odessa on a later visit in 2018, I unexpectedly ran into an Iraqi friend from Donetsk who had been part of the small "Russian-language for foreigners club" that my Italian friend F. and I started. The city, it seemed to me, was a genuine bed of internationalism.

All of my memories of Donetsk are deeply connected to the exciting, diverse community of friends I became a part of there: the memory of tasting Ukrainian homebrew, known as *samogon*, for the first time at a suburban *dacha* barbeque for my friend A.'s birthday; of being rescued by G. and M. from a perilous conversation with a skinhead; of trekking the forested cliffs by the Sviati Hori monastery with N.; climbing to the top of an abandoned building at sunrise with twenty people; of seeing a local production of Mikhail Bulgakov's "Zoyka's Apartment" with K.; of taking A. to our first concert of the legendary Russian rock group, DDT; of being invited, with F., G., and M., to eat homemade *okroshka* (local cold soup) at 10 PM by a retired coal miner who wept to us about his recent divorce; of nearly getting arrested for open-air drinking, watching Y., the son of a local lawyer, intimidate the police officers and send them packing. These are little stories and experiences that made my time there unforgettable.

But I also remember just the way the city and wider region were. Donetsk felt like an optimistic place, a sunny climate with warm rains, and lightly snowy winters. Families with young children filled the local parks. Old folks took summer dips in the polluted lake. Muscle cars blared down Artyema Street. People were polite and rowdy, proud and discerning. The sturdiness of the roads and slopes underwrote the reliable, clean public transport. Outdoor concerts and festivals took over public squares and parks. On game nights, *Shakhtyor* ("Miner") soccer club fanaticism imbued the city with a sense of borderline lawlessness. I saw Vitali Klitschko, now the Mayor of Kyiv, speak at a rally on Lenin Square. I heard Yulia Timoshenko (the former prime minister of Ukraine – *eds*.) on the radio. Political buzz stirred the air. But as my friends and I parted in May 2013, nobody knew that only a few months later, after I had moved to St. Petersburg to continue teaching, Ukrainians in Kiev would revolt against their corrupt leadership in what came to be known as the Maidan Revolution, sparking a civil war with the Russian-backed secession of Donetsk and nearby Lughansk.

Fig. 1 A weekend in early fall at Park Sherbakova, Donetsk, 2012.

In the ensuing months of war, between the surreal footage of the Donetsk airport and soccer stadium riddled with bullets and quaking from distant explosions, I learned of the deaths of acquaintances who were drawn to enlistment. I spoke frequently with my friends F., a transplant from Italy, S. a Ukrainian computer programmer, and V., a local Ukrainian lawyer. All of them had their own unique perspectives on the events transpiring and their media coverage, from the highly emotional and personal, to the cynically stoic. V., a dear friend with whom I communicated regu-

larly until his untimely death by heart attack in 2021, was the only one who planted his roots deeper in Donetsk after the invasion, as his grandparents, who had raised him after his parents died, were immoveable from their dacha outside of the city. F. lost her fiancée to a missile strike and moved to Poland with deep grief and bitterness, while S. got married and relocated to Chernihiv, north of Kiev, to work for a software developer. As families were torn apart, the immense interpersonal fallout from this fresh rift between Western and post-Socialist nations was mirrored in a geopolitical barrage of sanctions against Russia, while diplomatic relations and Russian oil deliveries to Europe were largely untouched.

St. Petersburg, 2014

Several of my fellow Russian teachers in St. Petersburg, who each had their own strong ties to Ukraine, were outspoken in their disgust for Russia. For me, the combination of disinformation, post-Soviet legal nihilism, and the tepid Western response somehow managed to normalize the conflict. While tanks began rolling down the Donetsk city streets, in St. Petersburg I taught my classes, visited museums, went to the theater, and volunteered at a cat shelter. While the secessionist government in Donetsk was rapidly consolidating its hold on Eastern Ukraine, a questionable referendum in Crimea led to a full Russian takeover of the peninsula. My friends, who had since fled to Kiev, were overcome with anger and disbelief, while those who remained in the occupied territories did so with a grim acceptance. V. described joblessness, regular failures of utilities, communications, and infrastructure, the imposition of punitive curfews, and the sounds of firefights from just outside the city. S. sardonically predicted that this new arrangement would last until someone in America or Europe decided it had to be dealt with. F. sought to tell her late fiancée's story, only to have the story stolen and her name uncredited in the publication.

Washington, DC, 2014

Returning to the US from Russia in late 2014, I found employment with a small but vigorous nonprofit in Washington DC known as the American-Russian Cultural Cooperation Foundation (ARCCF). Established in 1991 as the USSR's complete breakup became immanent, the ARCCF was led by a prestigious group of American political and business leaders who saw the arts as a powerful means of building respect and fraternity between the US and the fledgling Russian state. Under the steady-handed and optimistic management of its executive director, Alexander Potemkin, the organization had brought the cellist Mstislav Rostrapovich and the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko to perform in Washington, celebrated the little-known friendship between Abraham

Lincoln and Tsar Alexander II, and constructed twin statues of Pushkin and Walt Whitman at American University and St. Petersburg State University, respectively.

My own late entry into the ARCCF coincided with the 75th anniversary of V-Day, for which we held a gala in the Russian Embassy. That was followed by the US premiere of Mira Todorovskaya's feature film "Meeting on the Elbe", and well-attended events celebrating the 1865 Gustavus Fox's mission to Russia, Leo Tolstoy's written correspondences with American readers, and the legacy of ARCCF's longtime president, Congressman James Symington. By the time I departed the organization in 2016, funding had virtually dried up due to Russia's declining reputation among Washington elites. ARCCF formally dissolved in 2020, unable to rebound in the aftermath of "Russiagate", the Trump Presidency, and the 2015 murder of Boris Nemtsov.

Fig. 2 ARCCF's celebration of James Symington, "Knight of Detente", 2015.

At the age of 27, I had no clear vision of my career path, but knew that Eastern Europe and Russia were an inextricable part of it. My passion for the language had grown and I undertook a short stint as a medical Russian-English interpreter in the University of Maryland hospital system. Challenges that I encountered in this work and elsewhere led me to the recognition that I needed and wanted to pursue higher education if I was to do something with my life that would be meaningful to me. A conversation with my undergraduate thesis advisor, the Tolstoy scholar Tom Newlin, led me to reach out to Igor Krupnik, coeditor of this volume and Arctic curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, who took me under his wing and generously invited me into the world of international Arctic science.

"Encountering" the Arctic, 2016–2018

At this time, in 2016, I found myself thrust into an intellectual landscape that I had never known existed, where the terms of debate and level of discourse matched my own concerns with social and environmental justice and different ways of knowing. Through the doorway of decolonial museum studies and the politics of repatriation, I first began to engage seriously with the history, politics, and lifeways of the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Then, at the International Congress for Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS) in Umeå in 2017, I had the opportunity to meet Indigenous leaders and Arctic scholars whose writing and work would guide my own research for years. Learning from leaders like U., V., and M., connecting with my mentors, and hearing about the fascinating research being done in the Arctic left me with a profound sense of belonging and purpose. Here was an intersectional, politically-attuned, solution-oriented intellectual community that scrutinized and celebrated complex human-nonhuman relationships to place, knowledge, and other beings. My scholarship today owes much of its influence to the PI's of the "Ice Law" project, housed at Durham University's Centre for Borders Research, whose innovative presentations and panels I attended at ICASS.

During my Masters' program at the University of Northern British Columbia, and under the supervision of Gail Fondahl (another volume coeditor), I was able to carry forward with social-legal studies and build an interdisciplinary basis of inquiry using geographic and anthropological methodologies. At the core of our grant-funded project were three midsummer months of paid research in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in the Russian Far East. My interest, which had grown out of Gail's decades of legal geographic inquiry in the region, concerned the formation of Indigenous "Territories of Traditional Nature Use", which were legislatively designed to empower rural communities to exert procedural rights over decisions and actions impacting their ancestral lands. Over those three months, I was fortunate to interview over twenty Indigenous leaders in various local organizations and branches of government, who shared with me their invaluable insights into the embodied operations of law. Three of the individuals with whom I spoke, and several personal student friends, became enduring connections with whom I corresponded for years afterward. It was these relationships with people, the land, and their shared abundance of kindness and nourishment that secured my devotion to Siberia.

Among my most valued memories of Yakutia are the celebrations I attended. Over two years, I had the pleasure of attending the solstice festivals of Ysy'akh, in two different places. At the first, in a vast fairground overlooking a city, I joined the Evenk relatives of my host for feasting and singing, painted solar symbols on an *uraha* (conical wooden house) with E. and S., played *khomus* (traditional mouth harp) with an elder and her granddaughter, and witnessed hundreds of local youths perform dances based on the Sakha epic poem, the *Olonkho*. At the second, I spoke and shared meals

with my friend M., her husband, and dozens of elder women in vibrant floral gowns, and watched awards ceremonies for community members. Under the midnight sun, I joined a group of friends from the university in many rounds of *kumis* (fermented mare's milk) and eventually found myself brought up on stage during a performance by the legendary Sakha rock group, "Cholbon." During my time in Yakutia, I also attended two weddings: of my pacifist, ex-military friend S.'s brother-in-law, which included a massive feast and costume-filled pageant followed by a champagne-fueled caravan through the city; and of my scholarly friend, M., whose Sakha-style wedding featured gift-giving, ritual lighting of a fire, and strings of wishes scribbled on paper.

Fig. 3 On stage with legendary Yakut rock band "Cholbon" during the Ysy'akh sun festival, 2019.

My research brought me into contact with many people versed in the region's Soviet and post-Soviet legal traditions, including my host in a small village. I remember finally finding an opportunity to help him with housework when he called me outside to reassemble a collapsed greenhouse frame. I felt welcome and open to both the people and the land, taking walks along the lively, potholed streets and giving English lessons to his daughter, joining a survey team on a daylong river trip into the taiga to find and cite illegal logging, trundling with groups of villagers along pitted mining roads and past burning garbage fields, eating reindeer soup and buttered black bread. In order to secure the official permits to allow me to join a herding brigade in the taiga for two weeks, an entire day was spent with my host and a prominent elder negotiating the irregular schedule, requirements, and caprices of the regional

permitting office, all to no avail. Russia's famed legal and bureaucratic obstacles made themselves apparent countless times through my research, broadening its scope from TTPs to a range of land, water, and biological resource management systems, and eventually to the study of legal consciousness and Indigenous legalities.

I departed Yakutsk in early August 2018, suntanned and vibrating with love and appreciation for the new friendships and knowledge that I had gathered on the way. A request by an Indigenous elder and poet hummed in my mind, far louder than the jet engines roaring out the window:

> I wish that you, an American, a human being, remain a friend of Yakutia, Russia, and the Indigenous peoples of the North. That you speak fairly of our life in your home country, tell them that we are regular people, not thinking of war and aggression. People live their lives, they grow. We would like if you conveyed a truthful portrait.

I was able to return to Russia in 2019 to disseminate and discuss the conclusions of my research with those who shared their knowledge while expanding my academic relationships in the study of Indigenous Siberian territorial protections. Throughout the two years of my degree studies, my relational network expanded dramatically to include people across the circumpolar north, Canadian and Russian scholars, community leaders, students, and local youth. The joy and stimulation from conducting graduate-level research, traveling, learning, and writing, compelled me, in 2019, to seek out a PhD program in the Arctic. As an American, that meant, for me, Alaska.

Alaska, 2020

In the early, panic-stricken months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I loaded my Toyota Camry with all my belongings and set off from Vancouver on the five-day drive northward to Fairbanks. Arriving with severely depleted brake pads and half-empty pizza box, my anxious excitement quickly gave way to uncertainty as I encountered shuttered businesses, an empty university, and a newly hazardous sociality that cast a pall over that period for everyone. To this day, it seems that society hasn't processed the consequences of the virus and our actions to contain it, but for some, including myself, "Peak COVID" was a time of unbearable anxiety and manic productivity. The strength and breadth of my network altered dramatically under COVID. I sensed a looming pessimism, witnessed by so many as the unraveling of political illusions, the transparency of power and its flagrant abuse by states and pharmaceutical companies. Death and demagoguery filled the airwaves. Westerners snickered at Russia's inferior Sputnik vaccine while Pfizer refused to release their vaccine recipe to the national and international domains.

Throughout these harrowing months, I sought to build connections across Alaska and its neighbor, Chukotka, where I envisioned myself conducting future fieldwork on the development of the Northern Sea Route's ports and their impact on Indigenous lifeways. Entangled with Russian, American, Indigenous, and nonhuman collectivities, I wanted to use my digitally mediated voice to elevate the causes of Indigenous self-determination, environmental responsibility, and peacebuilding across the international divide. While remotely building my knowledge of Alaska history and politics with my PhD supervisor, Amy Lovecraft, I joined the Arctic Institute's Winter College, received a fellowship to participate in the North Pacific Arctic Conference at the East-West Center, became a supporting member of the Fairbanks-Yakutsk Sister Cities commission, and spent two years as the lead for the Science and Diplomacy project group at the Association of Polar Early Career Scientists, where I developed friendships and collaborative partnerships with young researchers from around the world.

From my isolated perch in a yet-unfamiliar northern city, I took comfort in the optimistic and stimulating company of brilliant young people in Russia, Canada, Turkey, the UK, Japan, and Brazil. Then, on 24 February 2022, the army of the Russian Federation marched through occupied eastern Donbas region of Ukraine and launched its first missile strikes against the cities of Kharkiv, Dnipro, and the capital, Kyiv. The moment I heard this news, around midnight at a friend's house, it felt as if a dull, soundless bell had been struck in my chest, emptying my lungs of air and heightening the small, shrill blare of electricity seeping from the walls.

Ripped connections

Less than a month before February 2022, the Fairbanks-Yakutsk Sister Cities coalition had celebrated its 30-year anniversary, with participation from citizen groups in both countries as well as government officials, including the mayors of both cities. Mounting tensions at the Ukrainian border were on everyone's minds, prompting us not to record the virtual meeting, but the shared enthusiasm and hope for friendship carried the event to fruition. As I described in an op-ed for the "Fairbanks Daily News-Miner" (a local daily newspaper), the event celebrated more than thirty years of relationship-building between the two cities, including in-person visits between Fairbanks North Star Borough Mayor Juanita Helms and Mayor Pavel Borodin of Yakutsk in 1989, the "Good Will Flight" of Everett Long from Fairbanks to Yakutsk in 1990, student exchanges between universities, a "Women in Business" conference, and scientific and journalistic collaborations.

Prior to the invasion, it was notable that the successes and joys of the Sister Cities program were never plagued the sense of "otherness" that the US-Russia relationship has so often provoked. Instead, it rested on a deep kinship and a vision for a

world with fewer borders and peaceful exchange. But in the invasion's aftermath, the falling out between Arctic neighbors posed an insurmountable obstacle to our efforts to demonstrate the power of US-Russian friendship. Despite the enthusiasm and heartfelt appreciation of all involved, the subsequent overtures of our Fairbanks coalition to partners in Yakutsk were met with radio silence. We took no umbrage, but sadly accepted the fact that the risks of communication with Western institutions had become too threatening for those living in Russia. While some sporadic personal communication has occurred since, it is with heavy hearts that we let the 30-year long relationship go quiet.

Another avenue of exchange that has since closed was the Russian American Pacific Partnership (RAPP), whose 26th annual meeting in 2021 I had the privilege of attending. The lively virtual gathering was attended by high-ranking diplomats and regional political and business leaders from across the Pacific Rim. Among the initiatives that I was most excited to learn about were new projects in the Shared Beringian Heritage Program, the working group developing a "Bering-Pacific Arctic Council" framework, and a Bering Straits Festival. The latter event was billed as a massive international and intercultural exchange, to be inaugurated with a symbolic maritime crossing by Chukchi and Siberian Yupik participants in traditional large skin boats called *baidaras*.

As the event approached, I developed a friendship with an affiliate at the Chukotka branch of the Northeastern Federal University. We spoke regularly about the importance of educational and language exchanges, discussed bringing Alaskan representatives to Chukotka's "Golden Raven" film festival, and even planned to co-author a paper on coastal para-diplomacy in the region. Though we continued to speak after the events of 2022, our understandings of the geopolitical situation rapidly began to diverge, with his insistence that the war was insignificant and American participation was still possible and welcome at the Festival, even as diplomatic relations had already been severed. We haven't spoken in many months, and the festival went forward without participants from Western nations, a lost opportunity of immense proportions for Beringia and the international community.

The "aftermath"

Almost two years later at the time of writing this article, casualties are estimated to have reached nearly 500 000 between both combatants, with estimated Russian deaths anywhere from 170 000 to 300 000, and Ukraine's near 70 000 (Landay 2023). A disproportionate number of those Russian casualties are young Indigenous men from all reaches of non-European Russia. Nearly a million Russians have fled their oppressive state (see Takakura et al., *this volume – eds.*), and neither party seems close to declaring anything akin to victory. Those of us accustomed to moving and dwelling

in a coherent polar universe, alongside migratory whales, birds, and floes of ice, have found ourselves disarticulated from and even without a place in the Arctic.

Russia's unconcealed violation of Ukrainian sovereignty (in contrast to the "clandestine" but violent 2014 breakaway of the Donetsk and Lughansk People's Republics) has catalyzed a division between nations of the global North unseen since the 1950s. Over thirty years of open exchange between Western nations and the former Soviet bloc have been summarily discontinued. The intractability of the conflict grows deeper with each Russian missile strike, fomenting angry, dehumanizing prejudice towards combatants and cultures on opposite sides and creating seemingly insurmountable social and political obstacles to peace.

While other active conflicts are also burdened with colonial legacies and fossil fuel-derived firepower, this war stands out by the involvement of two nuclear superpowers and its impact on the Arctic's hard-won institutionalism. The ease with which many of us moved across national boundaries in the Arctic was always dependent on a distinct world order, maintained and nurtured by neoliberal capitalist commitments that ascended globally after the dissolution of the USSR. The current disintegration of Arctic research, business, and state relationships is only part of a much larger tragedy marking the "Capitalocene," (Moore 2017) but it is a tragedy all the same.

In the months following the invasion, my colleagues in the APECS Russia National Committee and APECS Arts project group reached out to the Science and Diplomacy group for support in carrying forward a webinar event that adopted a quote of Kandinsky's as the title: "There is No Must in Art, Because Art is Free" (*V iskusstve est' absoliutnaia svoboda*). The director of the Kirkenes-based Pikene på Broen, the founder of a Moscow-based arts collective, and cultural diplomacy researcher at UiT, all working internationally in the Barents region, shared both personal and professional impacts of the war on their lives: the loss of longtime collaborators, risks of returning to Russia, the disruption of research agendas. The most powerful story for me, however, concerned Pikene på Broen's Barents Spektakel event, which took place just two days after the invasion. The group had coordinated the symbolic sounding of foghorns across the Pasvik (Paatsjoki) River on the Kola Peninsula border, but the contingent on the Russia side had their permits for equipment and speakers revoked by the government. The Norwegian side carried forward their plan, hoping to hear the corresponding horns from Russia, but were met with devastating silence. Later, however, they learned the Russian group had gathered, without equipment, and sounded their unamplified horns in solidarity. Listening to this story, I could feel the sorrow, longing, and kinship that binds people across artificial borders and took comfort in the spirit of shared humanity that animates our most liberatory impulses.

The "Aleut"/Pacific connection

In Alaska, I have been working for the last year and a half as a consultant with the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, one of the two Unangax̂ communities of the Pribilof Islands with a deep and equivocal history of Russian and American colonization. Under a grant from the North Pacific Research Board, our Ecosystem Conservation Office team has endeavored to expand and improve the Tribally-owned environmental monitoring app known as the Indigenous Sentinels Network (ISN). In the early days of my involvement, we had several meetings with the Aleut International Association, one of the Indigenous permanent participant organizations in the Arctic Council that hoped to bring communities from Russia, specifically Kamchatka, into the ISN monitoring network. This effort moved slowly, and communication was challenging across the board. But once the war began, the possibility of Indigenous involvement from Russia was doomed. We have continued to advance the project in other ways, including gathering an Indigenous Sentinels Advisory Assembly composed of representatives from Eastern Bering Sea Tribes, developing custom monitoring programs for partners in interior Alaska, and revamping the ISN platform to ensure Indigenous data sovereignty and coordinated monitoring. Our hope is that, once peaceful relations are reestablished, ISN can become a valued tool for communities in all regions of the circumpolar north.

My position with St. Paul has also brought me into the coalition supporting the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area, an initiative of the Bering Sea Elders Group, Kawerak, Inc., and the Association of Village Council Presidents that was realized through Presidential Executive Order 13754. In the words of the order, it has the purpose of "working to conserve Arctic biodiversity; support and engage Alaska Native tribes; incorporate traditional knowledge into decision-making; and build a sustainable Arctic economy that relies on the highest safety and environmental standards, including adherence to national climate goals." The 112 300 square mile zone demarcated by the Executive Order is abruptly truncated at the international border, and among the many issues of management under negotiation is the safety and monitoring of ship traffic in the Bering Strait Region.

In the process of supporting the official Tribal Advisory Council to address this issue, we have encountered the very salient problem that nearly all the hazardous ship traffic, in particular oil and gas tankers, takes place in Russian maritime space on the western side of the sea. Russia's abominable environmental track record, Putin's reckless development of the Northern Sea Route, impacts to operational maritime safety from Western sanctions, and limited coast guard communications combine to make each oil or gas tanker transiting the Bering Strait a potential Exxon Valdez-scale catastrophe for local ecosystems. And while the US Coast Guard can conduct oil spill response exercises and prepare coastal communities with response equipment, early containment and management of a disaster falls entirely to Russian companies

and authorities, whose reliability remains in question since the 2020 Norilsk diesel spill. Unless normal diplomatic relations are restored, our Tribal Advisory Council and Coalition can only advocate for oil spill preparedness, which, in the Bering Sea, remains frustratingly lacking.

Fig. 4 Person walks along Nome beach, strewn with driftwood, June 2023, 10 months since Typhoon Merbok

"Transboundary-ness" after 2022

Having moved to Alaska expressly to research transboundary issues of Indigenous food sovereignty, conservation, and maritime governance in the Russian/American Arctic space, I still haven't come to grips with this geopolitical crisis. I have gratefully been able to pivot my research to focus on Alaska, but a coal of dis-ease smolders constantly in the pit of my stomach. My life and career, so intimately woven through the East-West divide, now seems indefinitely suspended by an eternal return of that divide's most violent expression. War breeds a lack of communication, lack of communication breeds distrust, distrust breeds competition, competition leads to wanton destruction of the planet, and peace becomes a naïve fantasy. Yet I cling desperately to radical hope. The wisdom of the earth, of children, of great spiritual leaders has not been eradicated despite the hardships of countless lifetimes.

Engaging deeply with Inupiat, Chukchi, and Yupik knowledge systems and embracing Donna Haraway's (2016) imperative to "make kin" with the nonhuman world, I have combatted the feeling of impotence by aligning intellectually and spiritually with Indigenous decolonial scholars and academics who can be described as "geophilosophers", "new materialists", and "post-humanists". Faced with the grand venalities of empire, that are wrapped and warped into the planet's wicked problems, I find inspiration and truth in the correspondences between human and nonhuman histories. The Bering Strait has undergone geophysical phases of bridging and dividing, a process mirrored by (relatively) recent historical happenings: swimmer Lynne Cox's 1987 crossing of the Strait, the 1988 friendship flight that carried a small group of Alaska Indigenous people to Chukotka to reconnect with family members, the 1989 Soviet-American Bering Bridge Expedition, and finally the full reestablishment of US-Russia relations in 1991. One year later, Chukotka's Indigenous peoples joined the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and throughout the decade, officials and conservationists from both countries developed the Shared Beringian Heritage Program, which culminated in the US's Bering Land Bridge National Monument and Russia's Beringia National Park being symbolically linked in 2013 for "the protection of the shared natural and longstanding cultural heritage of Chukotka and Alaska" (Berkman et al., 2016). Though few, such human efforts stand out and endure, for there is a natural inclination in the land and the people of the region to remain connected, to struggle against division.

This past summer, I had my first glimpse of the Chukotka coast from the observation deck of the Hokkaido University research vessel, Oshoro-Maru. I had been invited onboard as a social scientist to study those who study the sea and understand how Japan's cultural animism, the respect for living beings and places that imbued their traditional religion of Shinto, influenced scientific conduct. But as we passed the (Russian) Big Diomede Island, partly obscured by its smaller American companion, Little Diomede, I was caught up in the strange winding of my own path. Seeing any part of Russia, where I had spent almost two years of my adult life, and especially seeing the northeastern land I had wished to connect with for my doctoral research, overwhelmed me with sadness. I felt small and unfulfilled, uncertain about the future in terms of the war, my work, my life. What could we, the Arctic research community, have done to build solidarity and transboundary resilience here? Could the realities of climate change and colonialism ever stir the better angels of human nature and dethrone the reckless, competitive spirit of empire? There, in that liminal space where all my work focuses, I couldn't feel at peace. My heart wrenched and twisted in between the two great landmasses.

In mid-July, I felt the islands slide by behind a thick fog as the Oshoro-Maru carved southward towards Japan. Under an invisible new moon, I sat alone on the observation deck, watching the twilit waves of the North Pacific burn gold and white. Shadows bound and dove between the troughs and crests, reenacting histories that

the sea cannot, will never forget. Eternity is the presence of all time at once, events interred at the crossroads of ley lines. I could see the dead. Whales and whalers, struggles against the succor of the harpoon. The giant and gentle sea cows, hauled in without the possibility of resistance to be butchered amidst stacks of otter furs. Once this sea brimmed with flippered and whiskered beings, playing and caressing, their numbers ever hidden by the edge of the horizon and the surface of the deep. Once these seas ran with blood and oil. Entranced, I saw the sea reveal all it had lost, awash in ghosts, the haunting of a massacre. When the sea plays tricks on the eyes, when a wave mimics the back of a whale or the head of a seal, it is only reminding us of what it once was…

Fig. 5 Sighting the Diomede Islands from onboard the Oshoro-Maru.

So too will the current war be written indelibly in the land and on bodies. I feel myself veined and skinned by so many liminal and turbulent spaces between "East" and "West", by the memories of friends lost and possibilities forgone. If peace, friendship, and hope are ever to be rescued from the rubble of war, I will be among those rebuilding all that has been demolished in these traumatic years.

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2 ARCCF's celebration of James Symington, "Knight of Detente." Photo: Kevin Allen, 2015.
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